Reply Regarding *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations*

Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen

Forthcoming in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*

We write to be read. Since the literary critic Wayne Booth came up with the concept of ‘the implied reader’ in 1961 (Booth 1983), we have had a way of talking about how authors may think about their readers, even when they do not exactly know who these readers will be. In this case, we have been blessed by the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* with five readers who together must be said to make for the very incarnation of our implied reader. Ours was an attempt to bring what has so often been treated by social scientists as deep background to the forefront of our conversations, and in this, our critics have certainly helped us. We are grateful to every one of them, and freely acknowledge most of the shortcomings that they pinpoint. Instead of going on the defence, we want to take this opportunity to highlight some Steppe concerns that are particularly ripe for further research.

Michael Reynolds is certainly right in stressing that the book is under-specified in its claims, in the sense that a number of the phenomena that we discuss have other causes than the existence of a steppe tradition, and that we have yet to disentangle these causes from one another in a satisfactory manner. He is also right in calling for more scholarship in this regard, and we hope colleagues will pick up the baton and disagree with us in interesting ways. Rather than going into the specific cases of divergent readings, we should like to linger on Reynolds’s highlighting of another kind of under-specification in our book. He writes:

One perhaps might speculate that America’s frontier experience endowed it with a steppe tradition of its own. [...] Neumann and Wigen, however, restrict their theory to the Eurasian steppe and provide no clear guidance as to whether their approach might have any relevance to explaining state formation elsewhere.

As acknowledged by scholars at least since the publication in 1893 of Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay ‘The Frontier in American History’, it is definitely the case that sustained clashes between sedentaries and nomads engender a frontier mentality amongst the winning sedentaries. Reynolds’ suggestion that we take up the comparative study of how this has played out through world history with a view to further specification is stimulating.

Indeed, upon reading the book, an IR colleague working in Colombia, Jochen Kleinschmidt (forthcoming), drew parallels between our rendering of a Steppe Tradition and the relations between colonising sedentaries and indigenous populations and Venezuelan herdsmen known as *llaneros*. Pekka Hämäläinen’s work on *The Comanche Empire* (2009) offers another such point of comparison with hybrid peripatetic polities in the Americas. Elsewhere in this symposium, Hendrik Spruyt asks in what degree we may find a lingering Steppe Tradition in today’s China. We may add that that we left the lingering Steppe Tradition in the Indian Subcontinent largely unexplored as well (for what we may, perhaps a bit facetiously, call limitations of space). We spot a panel in the making here.
Given our dependence on David Anthony’s own work for our treatment of the pre-historical Steppe, it is a relief, and also highly gratifying, to see that we pass muster on this score. Let us also take this opportunity to underline what a highly apposite source archaeology is for International Relations. In this short article alone, Anthony raises a number of intriguing issues that speak directly to IR’s main concerns. More of our numbers should rise to this challenge, so that we may put the discipline on firmer world-historical foundations. Anthony’s main charge is our sin of omission in not paying more attention to the Scythians, as he writes:

Neumann and Wigen describe a significant jump in scale from older steppe polities to those of the Scythians and Xiongnu, which they term ‘empires.’ In their interpretation, it was after this jump that steppe polities really began to affect European and Chinese institutions. But the reasons why this jump occurred are obscured by the brief attention they give to the Scythians.

We take this to heart. It is not enough, as we do, to point out that personal bodyguards of a leader grow into armies that then grow into empires. Empires, understood with Tilly as polities consisting of a centre and peripheries, with power relations or ‘contracts’ between the centre on the one hand and each of the different peripheries on the other, are arguably a more basic world-historical kind of polity than states. It is thus unsatisfactory that the literature on the earliest formation of steppe empires is so limited. Scythian archaeology is the key place to look.

We admit to being a bit peeved by Hendrik Spruyt’s pointing out that we should have been bolder in our claims of how Carolingians stood in a steppe tradition, when he writes:

Carl Stephenson shows that feudalism had much in common with ancient Germanic practices in which a free warrior ‘voluntarily, by a solemn obligation, agreed to become the devoted follower of a military chief...in return for sustenance, equipment, and a share of the booty gained in war’ [...]. Feudal relations of lord and vassal were informed by this tradition and were similar to how Neumann and Wigen describe the relations on the steppe between leaders and retinue.

It is certainly the case that the swearing of fealty is an old Germanic tradition, and one that remained key to social life in Viking areas at the time of the Carolingians. We did make a point of how the Steppe Tradition rubbed off on Germanic tribes that were Hunnified in the fourth and fifth centuries, and we did mention the importance of the Avars that were conquered by the Carolingians, but we should probably have been bolder. Again, we simply stoop to greater knowledge.

Jenny White juxtaposes our macro-sociological approach to her own ethnographical one, and makes an interesting triangulating point, as follows:

In 2014, I carried out oral history research about Turkey in the 1970s, a period of violent left-right polarization. [...] Independently of Neumann and Wigen’s work, which I had not seen,
and on a quite different scale, my micro-analytical social anthropological research led me to develop a model of political organization characterized by almost exactly the same elements that the authors list for the steppe tradition (122).

This is, of course, highly gratifying to read. It also further highlights the basic underlying theme of our book, which is that patron/client relations are the basic stuff of politics, and that these relations are particularly visible in the personalised politics of the Steppe Tradition. By the very same token, however, it is a daunting task to specify what is simply politics as usual, and what is due to the particular historical sequence that leads from the Steppe, via the Ottoman Empire, to today’s Turkey.

White’s interviews may also be a starting point for answering Reynolds’s questions about the Steppe Tradition from 1950 to 2000. Some political actors in Turkey used this repertoire; however, because those groups remained fragmented and did not coalesce around a single person, they did not manage to claim rulership of the country and remained largely out of scholarly sight for all but anthropologists and a handful of social historians. Periods of feuding between several rival claimants with smaller personal retinues, who did not end up as empire builders, are ubiquitous in the history of the Steppe Tradition, and should not be seen as anomalies. Moreover, because Eurasian political repertoires are hybrids of practices drawn from both Steppe and European traditions, one should neither seek to explain all political action by way of the Steppe Tradition, nor should one see the evidence of other ways of conducting politics as proof of its demise or absence. The fact that presidents, prime ministers or general secretaries conduct politics in other ways for a few decades does not mean that the Steppe Tradition has disappeared as a potential repertoire to be used for mobilising people and contesting power. As we may observe at the time of writing, such practices may return.

Joseph MacKay rightly highlights our ginger use of functionalism. It is a timely move on his part, for we hold, with Durkheim and rather untimely given functionalism’s bad reputation, that a functional approach, where the point is to specify which tasks are taken care of by what practices, is a good start to begin, as long as one is not stuck there. Our focus on practices are, after all, our way to downplay structural analysis, the pitfalls of which McKay himself also chooses to highlight. We think of these choices in pragmatic terms, as guided by the aspects of the social sequence under scrutiny that one wants to tease out. By the same token, the approaches are complementary: structural and practical analyses together make for a thicker description and so for a better perspectivisation than what only one approach could have mustered.

We would contend that it is not the functionalist starting point, but rather our use of ideal-typification that tends to present the Steppe Tradition as less flexible. Since we ideal-typify features that grew out of a specific political and social setting in the distant past and then use the continued presence of the ideal type’s features over a long period of time, we emphasise that which stays the same within the tradition. This is not an argument for cultural, social or political inflexibility, nor is it an argument for essences. Rather, it is an argument for keeping in mind and highlighting that, although most if not all social characteristics and distinctions are malleable, some are less malleable than others, even to the point that they may linger for make themselves felt for millennia. The possibility that some will prefer to read our account as more rigid and essentialist than we intended them to be is an unfortunate by-product of our method – the very method that allows us to synthesise a relatively long period of history.
McKay also pertinently observes another challenge, as follows:

The difficulty is that, paraphrasing Sankaran Krishna ([...], paraphrasing Ashis Nandy), ‘The steppe is not the non-West.’ We need ways to conceptualize interregional relationships in (Afro)Eurasia that do not reduce to interregional binaries.

We absolutely agree that such books are needed, just as we agree with Spruyt’s point that there are other sedentary traditions of polity-making that cannot be dealt with by way of a European ideal type. However, we came to the writing of this book from having written books on Russia’s and Turkey’s cultural understandings of Europe. The West/non-West binary was, and remains, our home turf, and we saw hybridization and co-constitutiveness in light of that. This is where we have our comparative scholarly advantages. If we may in a small way inspire a book along the lines charted by MacKay, we would be very happy to see the potential of such an added perspective realised.

Let us end by once again thanking the other parties to this symposium for joining our effort to eke a long-suppressed and once central issue of inter-polity relations onto the scholarly agenda of our discipline.

References


Kleinschmidt, Jochen (forthcoming) ‘The Llanero Tradition: States and Swarms on the Eastern Plains of Colombia and Venezuela’